

Bitterly divisive politics fuel Budapest unrest

As calm returns, Hungary's young democracy examines left-right clash and awaits crucial local elections Oct. 1.

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Many explanations have been put forward to explain the violence and civic unrest that marred Budapest last week, including economic dissatisfaction, moral outrage, and the memory of the 1956 uprising against Soviet rule. While some of these factors sparked the fire, the bitter divide between right and left in the post-communist republic provided the fuel that made it burn so brightly.

Problems began last week when a leaked recording revealed that Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany had admitted lying about the state of the economy before April's general election. Thousands mobilized in protests that turned violent after football hooligans and right-wing extremists stormed the state-owned Hungarian Television, burned cars, and clashed with police, leaving more than 200 injured.

While the violence has abated, smaller-scale protests are set to continue until crucial local elections on Oct. 1. Should the government suffer a crushing defeat, however, demonstrations could grow again.

The prime minister's admission that his Socialist Party had concealed tax increases and energy price hikes that were introduced once the election was won undoubtedly caused vexation. But analysts such as Prof. Laszlo Csaba, an economist at Budapest's Central European University, say the measures aimed at cutting the huge budget deficit have not yet hit hard enough to cause the explosive reaction.

Comparisons to 1956 are tenuous. In 1956, thousands died as Soviet tanks crushed a massive revolution. In 2006, thousands of protesters congregating outside parliament slurp soft drinks and call for their elected government to resign. The violence itself was a sideshow.

For many, the deep political divisions that permeate Hungarian society fueled the protests and gave extremists an excuse to indulge in recreational rioting. The polarization was apparent in the way the two sides reacted to Gyurcsany's speech, which he says was aimed at forcing his party to accept tough economic reforms. The right listened to select quotes and heard a cynical dissembler, while the

left heard only a brave leader.

"The divide is key to understanding the outpouring of anger," says Balazs Kovacs, an analyst at Freedom House, which monitors postcommunist nations. "It has been present since the move to democracy in 1990 and deepened when Fidesz [the main right-wing opposition party] lost power at the 2002 elections."

Tensions ran high in 2002, with couples divorcing and friendships dissolving over politics. Fidesz surprisingly lost power and kept the temperature high by claiming election fraud. This year, the mud-slinging continued, reported with heavy bias in the partisan press. Right-wing activists, bitter after a second defeat to the Socialist- Liberal coalition, were ripe for action.

Dr. Jozsef Bayer, the director of the Political Science Institute at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, says Fidesz deliberately primed its supporters to act. "This crisis is not simply a popular protest against austerity programs and lying politicians," he says. "The division of the left and the right has been consciously dug deeper by Fidesz. Political divisions are normal in a democracy, but instigation of hatred is not. In my view, this was a planned campaign to destabilize the current government and bring [Fidesz leader Viktor] Orban back into power."

The right uses fears that the socialists are just the communists in new capitalist clothing as its main political tool. Gyurcsany, a former communist youth leader turned millionaire businessman, faces accusations of using his Communist Party links to illegally accumulate his wealth in the 1990s.

The fact that the socialists retained assets from communist times does not help. One obvious symbol of this is the socialists' headquarters, which used to be the seat of the Communist Party and was the scene of gruesome violence in 1956. Gyurcsany, in a tacit nod to the link, last week said his party would abandon the hated building. The occasional tactical outing of communist-era spies adds to the problem. All parties have former secret police members in their ranks, but when a socialist is uncovered, as former premier Peter Medgyessy was, it reinforces the communist image.

According to Mr. Kovacs, such cynical use of the past creates the divide.

"Ideologies and rightful, as well as perceived, grievances are being abused by politicians to gain support and avoid serious policy dilemmas," he says.

Most analysts, however, believe that Gyurcsany will survive the Oct. 1 elections and carry out his reforms, although tensions could rise as the economy slows.

Even though neither side is likely to emerge unscathed, what's really at stake is Hungary's teenage democracy.

"With the credibility of both Gyurcsany and Orban plunging, the real question is not what happens ... after the municipal elections," says Kovacs. "The most important question is whether institutions will retain people's confidence. If not, then we are looking at a real crisis."